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ABSTRACT

This study evaluates student attitudes about the use of portfolios in an English composition course. During the course of a semester, students in an English 101 course at Central Arizona College compile a portfolio of their compositions. Included in the portfolio is a rewrite of the first assigned paper (P-1). The P-1 paper was due the second week of the semester and received evaluative remarks only (no grade) from the instructor. Students were later asked to rewrite P-1. Near the end of the semester, 24 students were asked to respond to the following two questions: 1) Why was/wasn't the P-1 easy to revise? 2) Should the P-1 be included in the portfolio? This document presents student responses and the instructor's conclusions. Conclusions were: 83% of students found the P-1 easy to revise and 96% believed the P-1 should be included in the portfolio; responses indicate that students understand the purpose of the assignment and are able to reflect on their improvement as writers. (RDG)

Abstract

Twenty-four English 101 Students Evaluate Their Portfolio Assignment

A Paper Presented at the Two-Year English Association West Region Conference
Park City, Utah, October 14-16, 1999

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Purpose and Relevance

The use of developmental and showcase portfolios is not uncommon in composition classes. Research in composition clearly shows that the use of portfolios is a useful assessment and student empowerment tool (Kress, 1992; Kaczmarek, 1994). Student attitudes about portfolios are not as well known. I decided to ask a class of ENG 101 students (N=24) to help me assess my own use of portfolios in their class just after the portfolios were due near the end of the fall 1998 semester. I wanted to learn what my students thought about portfolio development. Specifically, I was interested in how they felt about my requirement of a certain paper as a portfolio piece.

Introduction

As part of my regular faculty load at Central Arizona College, I teach sections of ENG 101 each semester. During the course, students are asked to 1) write six 500 word essays based on readings in American culture; 2) develop a summary/reaction journal based on ten readings; 3) create a portfolio based on the rewrites of three essays; and 4) write a 500 word in-class final exam.

The Study

This presentation involves section 3 above. For the three-paper portfolio, the students are asked to include a rewrite of the first essay of the semester (which was initially due the second week of the semester and known as the P-1). They are given the choice of which other two essays to include from the other five assigned papers. What is important to me in this portfolio project is that the P-1 paper was not graded; I made only "light" evaluative remarks on the drafts that I see. My purpose in requiring the P-1 as a portfolio

piece is simple: I want the students to recognize that they have improved as writers and editors by the end of the semester (which is when the portfolio is due).

The questions concern the first essay written for the class, referred to as the P-1 (and required later in the portfolio).

1. Why was/wasn't the P-1 easy to revise?
2. Should the P-1 be included in the portfolio? Why?

The Presentation

Complete student responses to the two questions and the researcher's remarks are included. In this twenty-minute presentation, I will share the complete unedited (except for spelling) written responses from the students. I will also discuss the students' individual analyses of their growth as writers and critical thinkers. I will also ask the audience to provide input about the meaning of the student remarks.

Questions and Responses

A. Why was/wasn't the P-1 easy to revise?

1. At first I thought the P-1 would be a difficult paper, but once I started, it flowed right out. At first the subject brings anger, then when you really think about it, the process can make you view things differently.
2. I found revising to be almost as much or as little work as the original depending on what was put in, in the first place. In the case of the P-1, not much.
3. My P-1 paper was easy to revise because it only had small errors scattered throughout. I answered the question Baritz asked. My paragraph structure was right. The things I wrote about flowed in order with each other.
4. The P-1 paper was easy to revise because it was a paper I enjoyed writing. I made mistakes that were easily fixable. I learned a great deal from that first essay and I continued to show improvement in the following essays.
5. The P-1 paper was hard for me to write because I had not written any essays for over twenty years. When I did my rewrite on it for the portfolio, it was a lot easier for me because of doing all the other essays.

6. The P-1 essay was easy to revise because now I know how to properly write a paper. Also since it was such an old paper, I had a new perspective on it.
7. For me it was the hardest one to rewrite. It would have been easier to start all over than to re-edit.
8. The portfolio was an interesting project. As I went over my papers I got the chance to see some of the changes in my writing. The P-1 was easy to revise, because I can see my mistakes more clearly now.
9. It was hard to revise because it was such a mess. It was so long ago that we wrote it that I had to go back and re-read the reading for it. I still didn't understand what I first wrote. The whole topic of the paper was a problem in itself. It was easy to fix my grammatical errors, but not too easy to fix the rest.
10. The P-1 was easy to revise because I wrote a few papers, and was able to improve my writing skills. By having improved my skills it made it easier to go back and revise my P-1 paper.
11. I would say the P-1 paper was quite easy to revise. I still had many ideas on the first paper that I failed to mention, and that gave me some inspiration to rewrite the P-1.
12. The P-1 was easy to revise because after being in class for a while I have been introduced to a better way of writing.
13. I think the portfolio was a helpful assignment. It allowed me to reflect on my past essays and compare the quality to my most recent papers. I think that my P-1 essay was definitely one of the worst papers I wrote. It was a little immature and under-developed. When I revised it, it was easy for me to pick out its flaws.

14. When I did the portfolio and looked at my P-1 paper, it seemed to be more juvenile than the later papers, like the E-3 and E-4. I had to make a lot more corrections on the P-1 paper. I eventually ended up totally rewriting the P-1 paper because it was so bad. I feel the portfolio assignment was a helpful tool to realize how much I improved on my writing skills. In one semester my writing abilities improved more than two years in high school. The P-1 essay wasn't easy to revise because there was too much to correct.
15. I thought doing the portfolio was a good idea. To me I don't see any differences between my P-1 and other essays. Looking at all of my essays I noticed common mistakes and repetition in all of them. Revising the P-1 seemed easier than revising the others.
16. The P-1 essay was somewhat easy to revise because there were many grammatical errors. The errors were obvious ones that at the time I was not aware of.
17. The P-1 essay was added to the portfolio because I felt that it was the best example of the progress that has been made on my behalf, and on that of the teachers capability to conduct a well taught class. Other than the P-1 essay I added my E-1 and E-2 because I feel that they were the best of all of my assigned writings. The P-1, when rewriting it, was not that difficult, because as the semester progressed I'd learned more about writing, and how to conduct a proper paper even though it may not seem so.
18. I enjoyed participating in the portfolio process because it made me sit down and re-evaluate all my work from this semester. Starting with my P-1 (which I though was good), I realized all the obvious mistakes. In the papers that followed, these "obvious mistakes" gradually disappeared, making each paper a better product. It was easy to revise the P-1. I learned all the "do's and don'ts" to a good essay.

19. The P-1 essay was easy to revise grammatically because of the improvements we have made on our skills in class. What was hard to do about it was revising the actual paper, and what was being said. This was hard because I couldn't remember what it was supposed to be about.

20. My P-1 paper was included in my portfolio because it was requested. This paper was a pure example of immature work, and lacking in quality. I did not re-do the whole paper for my portfolio, only corrected points pointed out to me.

My portfolio did show me I had a lot to learn. It proved to me that you are never too old to learn.

21. I felt my P-1 was the hardest to revise because it was the first paper I had to write. I also found that it had the most mistakes. It had at least twice the amount of errors than the rest of my papers.

22. I think that the P-1 paper was easy to revise. After writing the other papers, and revising the mistakes in them, the P-1 mistakes were easier to find.

23. The P-1 seemed like it was easy to revise because at this point in the semester I could pick out the mistakes fairly easy. Mistakes that hopefully I don't make at this point in the semester.

24. The P-1 paper from my Eng. 101 was a very simple paper to revise for my class portfolio. The English poet R. F. Burton said, "Ones writing is at his best in its purest and earliest forms." When I wrote the P-1 I had very little understanding of the mechanical order needed to write an essay in English. I was not certain where to place commas, colons, and semicolons. However my ideas were at their finest and purest.

i do believe that my work began to decline in quality as I started worrying more about the grammar and the mechanical structure, and less about the theme of my reports.

B. Should the P-1 be included in the portfolio? Why?

1. I think you should leave all three papers in the portfolio up to the individual. Let them make their own decisions about the papers that they want included.
2. Yes. It shows best how much has been learned through the semester.
3. I think my P-1 should have gone in the portfolio because it only had mechanical errors that could be fixed. I think I did not have that much trouble with it because I really took my time on it.
4. The P-1 should be included in the portfolio. Writing the first paper I was bound to make mistakes, and learning how to fix them was a good learning experience. Throughout the semester I have learned to enjoy writing and was able to see that improvement in my further papers.
5. I believe the P-1 should be included in the portfolio. Including the P-1 shows how far we have progressed in our writing since the first of the semester.
6. I think it should be included in the portfolio because the paper shows us how much our skills have improved since the start of the class.
7. Yes, it should. It should be included because it is hard to rewrite. It gives everyone a chance to see how far they have come in the course, and to see if they can make a piece of crap smell like a rose.
8. The P-1 should be included because you get a chance to see your improvements.

9. I want to say no because it was my worst piece, and I felt that it brought my grade down. But I also see your point in putting it in to make us see the difference in our writing, and to let us improve it. Maybe if we re-did it, but not for our portfolio. I could have put another paper in there and gotten a better grade. Still, revising the rest of them has helped me see my strengths and weaknesses. But you know me, always worried about my grade!
10. I think that the P-1 should be included in the portfolio because it is like a study guide for writing. You can go back and look at your errors and weaknesses and improve on them.
11. Yes. It is good to see how much we have progressed in this class. Including the P-1 demonstrates how much we are able to grow.
12. Yes, I believe the P-1 should be included. Because the P-1 is the very first paper written, you can see the improvement after time.
13. I do believe that it was appropriate to use my P-1 in my portfolio because it allowed me to decently evaluate and critique my writing.
14. The P-1 should be included in the portfolio because it makes you realize as a writer how much you have improved over the semester.
15. I think the P-1 should be included in the portfolio because it does show people how their writing has changed.
16. I believe the P-1 essay should be included in your portfolio because it allows the students to see their growth in writing.
17. The P-1, in my opinion, should be added to the portfolio because it shows the progress that we as students have made in the passing months. Next semester, in Dr.

Ross' 102 class, I look forward to learning more about (the fine art of) writing well thought-out papers.

18. The P-1 should absolutely be included in the portfolio so you can see the progress you have made in your writing skills.

19. The P-1 probably should be included.

20. I believe if the P-1 was not included in my portfolio my grade would have been better, but with it in my portfolio it made me realize just how much I learned. I think I want to learn more than I want that good grade.

21. I definitely think it should be included. The P-1 shows how much you grow as a writer through the course. It also showed what you needed to work on the most.

22. I think that putting the P-1 in our portfolio was a good idea. It gave us a chance to go back to the very beginning of the semester and look at the writing we were doing, and then compare it to the writing we are doing now.

23. Yes, the P-1 should be in the portfolio because comparing the P-1 with our more recent papers shows us the difference in our writing.

24. Apart from the fact that the P-1 was required to be included in my portfolio, I think it was very necessary to include my first paper because it serves as an example of my work in its beginning forms. As students start to worry more and more about the mechanical structure of their papers, and as they start to worry about agreeing with the views of their peers, the themes of the papers could begin to distance themselves from the true views of the author.

Conclusion

By simply counting responses, we can see that 83% of the students (20/24) found the P-1 easy to revise and 2) 96% of the students (23/24) believed the P-1 should be included in the portfolio. (See Table 1 below.)

Table 1. Simple Count responses to Questions 1 & 2

N=24

<i># who indicated P-1 was easy to revise</i>	<i># who indicated P-1 should be included in the portfolio</i>
20	23
<i># who indicated P-1 was hard to revise</i>	<i># who indicated P-1 should not be included in the portfolio</i>
4	1

But their explanations in the responses, as seen above, contain perspectives and attitudes that indicate they sense, and even understand, the purpose for including the P-1. The notion of selection (or decision making) can be associated with critical thinking (Kress, 1992; Kaczmarek, 1994). Significantly, many of the statements above show reflection, assessment, and understanding, both about the assignment and the nature of the changes most of the students have undergone as they "emerge" as academic writers. Student 19 indicated that the paper was easy "was easy to revise grammatically because of the improvements we have made on our skills in class." Student 6 indicated that "the P-1 essay was easy to revise because now I know how to properly write a paper. Also

since it was such an old paper, I had a **new perspective** on it." These statements are fairly representative of the responses to question #1. But perhaps more importantly from the critical thinking perspective is comments from Student 13: "I do believe that it was appropriate to use my P-1 in my portfolio because it allowed me to decently evaluate and critique my writing." For the purposes of this brief study, such student self-recognition about the portfolio process and their own growth as writers portrays their growth as critical thinkers—not just *within* the assignment but *about* the assignment as well.

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